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Internationalising Work-Integrated Learning for Law Students

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***Abstract*— This paper explores an appropriate model for internationalising Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) for law students through a digital environment. It argues that the traditional educational goals of WIL can not only be legitimately achieved through appropriate virtual tools but that e-learning platforms enable more powerful learning opportunities for law students by enhancing the scope for internationalisation and global collaboration in cooperative education.**

***Keywords*—Internationalisation, Work-Integrated Learning, Cooperative Education, Law, Collaboration.**

I. INTRODUCTION

It has been acknowledged that ‘the 21st century has carried us into an era of globalization characterized by advanced technology driven by a knowledge-based workforce’ [1]. Globalization, or internationalisation, in the university context often refers to the processes of internationalising curriculum or internationalising the classroom. In this paper, the concept is used differently to describe a learning experience external to the classroom that crosses international borders. This learning experience involves an international work-integrated learning (WIL) placement where a law student and their academic supervisor will be located physically in Australia, while the employer will be physically located in another country. The use of rapidly developing information and communication technologies will readily support the internationalisation of such WIL experiences.

Developments relating to the internationalisation of the curriculum and classroom in universities primarily have been in response to the growing cultural diversity of the student cohort. However, the Faculty of Law at the Queensland University of Technology (the Faculty) has only a relatively small cohort of international students: less than 100 international students out of a domestic student population of over 2,500. It is argued that this lack of student diversity makes the need to explore other avenues to internationalise the educational experience of domestic students even more important. There are significant benefits to exposing undergraduate law students to other professional legal cultures. For example, the increasingly global legal environment calls for skills that include the development of cross-cultural communication skills and other intercultural competencies, as well as the ability to analyse a legal problem within another jurisdictional setting and to negotiate the resolution of a dispute in cross cultural settings. A program that enables domestic students to develop these skills within a mentored environment enhances the cross cultural learning experiences and provides necessary exposure to the global legal environment.

Within the Faculty a lack of student participation in international WIL programs has been noted. This primarily may be attributed to such factors as the practical reality of lack of finances, family commitments and the need for students to continue with local part-time or full-time employment. The proposed International Virtual Placement (IVP) will enable students who are unable to travel to experience many of the benefits of an international learning experience. The IVP may have further benefits as it should appeal to the generational preference for the flexibility provided by e-learning platforms.

This paper will examine the wider WIL context, the Faculty of Law perspective, the combining of e-learning platforms and work-integrated learning, and propose a model of international virtual work-integrated learning.

II. THE WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING CONTEXT

A. What is Work-integrated Learning?

Research into WIL experiences is a problematic exercise. Whilst large numbers of students around the world participate in work-based education each year, there is great diversity in the nature of the programs offered. Such experiences range from highly structured, university controlled placements garnering academic credit, to informal situations where students volunteer to be part of a workplace outside the formal university semester. There have been numerous attempts to define the concept of WIL. For example, it has been described as: "...a structured educational strategy integrating classroom studies with learning through productive work experiences in a field related to a student's academic or career goals" [2]. Other definitions describe the various formats used in WIL as "the integration of academic learning experiences with those in professional practice through workplace experience (including work placement, work experience, practicum, clinical placement, internships etc) that secures learning outcomes that are both transferable and applied" [3].

Research in this area has been summarised through literature reviews, attempted definitions and conceptual models in educational literature for many years [4]. However, in this field where educational practice is so affected by the pragmatic factors of the workplace, even theoretical models appear to be designed to be context specific.

Overarching theory gives educators comfort in designing learning experiences as it ensures our practices are informed by research. However, in the field of WIL, where theories of learning are only one of the many factors that impact on the success of the learning experience, they are arguably not as helpful[5]. This is particularly so where the proposed task requires the creation of a new type of work-integrated experience, that is intended to operate in the digital environment and not in the physical workplace, as was the focus at the time earlier models were conceived.

B. Who are the participants?

Work-integrated learning programs generally involve at least three parties: the student, the workplace supervisor and an academic coordinator. From the student's perspective, WIL experiences provide an opportunity to augment their theoretical training with practical skills, learn about career options, explore their abilities and mature as they move towards transition to the professional workplace[6]. Where WIL activities involve physical placement in a workplace they also may present some drawbacks from the student's perspective, including travel and transportation costs, additional expense in meeting workplace dress standards and limited opportunities to obtain experience in the student's particular area of interest[7].

From the employer's perspective, the potential benefits of WIL experiences include the opportunity to: screen potential graduate employees, engage positively with the higher education sector, increase market awareness of the firm's culture and take advantage of students' currency of knowledge in the relevant discipline field. The potential drawbacks include difficulties in managing relationships with students[8] giving appropriate feedback[9], finding physical space for students who are placed in the organisation, and the pressure of having to supervise the student in an already busy schedule.

From the university's perspective, WIL opportunities improve the quality of the educational experience for students, offer a recruitment advantage, assist the university in building professional and industry networks and stimulate curriculum development. International work experience placements also offer universities the opportunity to enhance their international status and develop their international expertise[10]. The potential drawbacks from the university perspective include the logistical difficulties often encountered in finding placements, a lack of staff with the necessary practical experience to coordinate the program effectively and the lack of career development opportunities for the academic staff members involved in such programs as distinct from research-based opportunities [11].

C. The Faculty of Law Perspective

The Faculty of Law at the Queensland University of Technology is one of the largest law faculties in Australia and offers a diverse range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses in conjunction with practical legal training programs. The Faculty caters effectively for the diverse learning needs of students through a range of on- and off-campus delivery modes, all of which include components of online delivery, providing a greater level of flexibility in terms of accessing study materials and resources, access to staff and the completion of assessment items. In addition, steps have been taken to ensure that graduates enter the workforce with appropriate levels of theory and knowledge combined with the requisite capabilities and skills to operate effectively in the context of professional practice required of both law and justice professionals.

However, in the Faculty's experience attempts to physically place undergraduate law students into relevant professional workplaces have not been entirely successful due to the large number of students in the undergraduate program and competition from other Law faculties for the limited number of placements available in the local area. In addition, there is a significant cohort of post-graduate students the Faculty must place through the Graduate Diploma in Legal Practice program.

D. Combining e-Learning Platforms and Work-integrated Learning

New information and communication technologies (ICT) are transforming the practices of both universities and workplaces. The internet, mobile technologies and, in particular, email have transformed traditional methods of communication within organisations. At the same time they have contributed to a surge of global initiatives in online learning and e-Learning in campus-based higher education. Whilst many universities are now using ICT for the flexible delivery of content, there are fewer examples of the effective use of technology to enable student centred and flexible learning that focuses on the learner rather than the transmission of content by the teacher[12]. E-Learning platforms are enabled through such technologies as video conferencing, skype, online chat, email, discussion forums, wikis and blogs.

Given the transforming nature of workplaces and the radical changes in work practices in organisations with sophisticated technological infrastructure, it is submitted that authentic work-integrated learning experiences can now be created in the virtual paradigm.

Similarly, given the wealth of current research documenting the changing nature of the way current students learn and the competing demands on their time, it is submitted that work placement opportunities that enable flexible delivery and flexible learning are also a desirable addition to the traditional physical placement programs offered by universities.

III. THE INTERNATIONAL VIRTUAL PLACEMENT MODEL

The International Virtual Placement model is being designed to provide an authentic and sustainable virtual workplace experience for undergraduate law students at QUT. It is anticipated that the range of international employers will extend across the spectrum of law firms, government, industry and community organisations, reflecting the wide variety of employment opportunities open to today's law graduates. The IVP will be offered to full-time, part-time and external QUT students as an elective subject in the Bachelor of Laws program. It will be allocated 12 points of academic credit and will be sufficiently flexible to be offered in either the standard 13 week semester or the summer program. It is yet to be determined what pre-requisites will apply, but it is anticipated that students will participate in the program in their final year of study.

The virtual workplace will operate from the Blackboard Learning Management System supplemented by the QUT e-Portfolio program. It is anticipated that once students are allocated to a placement, they will be given a level of access to the technological infrastructure used by their virtual employers. It is hoped that the technological platform will provide an appropriate mix of synchronous and asynchronous online communication formats, such as video, skype, discussion forum, online chat wikis and email. As this project is still in the developmental phase our learning design goals are aspirational. From our research to date we envisage a program with the following main features.

Students will apply for their work placement position by answering an advertisement created in a virtual workplace newspaper format situated on the designated IVP website. It is anticipated that the range of available international placement opportunities will give students the opportunity to choose an experience in their preferred field and jurisdiction. Specific criteria will apply and students will need to prepare a resumé outlining their experiences and demonstrated strengths and interests. Student resumé's will need to be prepared using the QUT Student Portfolio and online Resumé Builder services, which are available to all students through the QUT Virtual network. Student Portfolio is an online tool that students can use to document and present their academic, professional and personal development in the format of an e-portfolio (electronic portfolio). The format of the service encourages students to identify their strengths and areas for improvement, also providing resources designed to help them undertake an audit of how their skills development is progressing, and plan for future skills development.

In preparing their applications students will be referred to the websites of their employers to explore the public profile, international location and market niche of the organisation. In response to their applications, students will receive virtual letters of acceptance that will allocate them to workteams and employers on the basis of their expressed preferences. It is envisaged that at this point students also will be invited to participate in their international employer's virtual workplace, after being granted a level of access to the organisation's intranet, online research tools, group emails and continuing education and professional development services. Throughout this period students also will be encouraged to develop team familiarity through an assessed interactive online exercise conducted by the Faculty on the learning management system (LMS) platform.

After teams have been allocated to employers, tasks will be set by workplace mentors in each international employer organisation. Students will be asked to collaborate in preparing a plan of action to scope their approach to completing the task, including an allocation of workloads and a timeline for completion. This plan of action also will require students to identify aspects of the task that may require expert advice from other sources or resources not readily available.

Following submission of the group's action plan, international workplace mentors will provide feedback to the group, highlighting practical considerations that may have been overlooked as well as the ethical, political and cross-cultural dimensions of the task that may not have been readily apparent to the students in their initial proposal.

The major assessment item will then involve completion of the assigned task in groups. It is envisaged that, given the range of international employers, the nature of these tasks may include diverse activities such as research into international legal problems, the preparation of client briefings on updates to the law in specific areas, memoranda of advice in relation to legal issues and submissions on issues of comparative law, law reform or public policy. It is anticipated that the scope of the task may need to be modified along the way to reflect the client's needs and the impact of other "real world" factors. The timing of submission of the task will therefore be negotiable between the student and the workplace mentor.

The international workplace mentors will assess the project and give detailed feedback to the group on the strengths, weaknesses and practical utility of the work produced. Wherever possible, it is proposed that students will receive a "red pen" or corrected version of the task, which they will be asked to revise in accordance with their mentor's input. It also is hoped that wherever possible students will ultimately see their work implemented in the "real world" context and receive feedback from their mentor regarding the client's satisfaction with the work produced, and where relevant, the outcome of the matter.

The final stage of the project will involve students being asked to revisit their original resumés through the e-Portfolio service to record and reflect upon their IVP experience.

IV. CONCLUSION

In the general field of university education it has been argued that 'unless today's students develop the competence to function effectively in a global environment, they are unlikely to succeed in the 21st century' [13]. This clearly places the responsibility upon universities to create 'spaces...where students are encouraged to explore the contours of global connectivity and interdependence, and their implications for questions of identity and culture' [14]. More particularly, in the legal education context it has been claimed that law students educated without an international perspective 'will have an impoverished understanding' of the law [15]. The International Virtual Placement model will provide an appropriate avenue for gaining an international perspective of the law and a level of competency to practise law in a global environment.

The e-learning or digital nature of the placement should appeal to the generational preference of today's learners, is adaptable to radically changing international workplaces and will also cross transnational and jurisdictional borders. As such, it is predicted that the IVP will provide mutually beneficial opportunities for both international employers and students.

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